

## Responsibilities of a Water System Owner

The most important responsibility of a water system owner is to provide drinking water that is safe and reliable. Owning and managing a “Group A” drinking water system can be rewarding. Failing to meet your legal responsibilities can result in severe public health impacts on those who consume your water, fines, lawsuits, and extra work.

*Group A drinking water systems provide service to 15 or more connections or 25 or more people for 60 or more days per year.*

### Key Legal Obligations

- A water system must collect water quality samples from the water source and distribution system, and factually report the results to local and state health departments as prescribed by Department of Health (DOH) regulations.
- When water quality does not meet health standards, all customers must be notified by the water system, using DOH-approved language and timeframes.
- An adequate quantity of water must always be available and must be delivered under proper pressure.
- Most water systems must have an operator certified by DOH.
- The system must be properly operated, maintained, and protected from vandalism, damage, and contamination.
- A water system must notify DOH of changes in ownership, management, or operations, and maintain current water system information on its DOH water facilities inventory.

### Helpful Hints

- Get a copy of water system requirements from a Division of Drinking Water regional office, and refer to it as necessary.
- Promptly follow up on all items identified during the sanitary survey of your water system.
- Inform DOH of any changes in the source, the system, contact information, etc.
- Put important operating policies in writing.
- Conduct annual budgeting, and consider capital improvement, preventative maintenance, and water quality sampling in the budgeting process.
- Maintain communication with customers.
- Participate in drinking water-related trainings and take advantage of one-on-one on-site technical assistance opportunities offered by DOH and its contractors.

DOH approves drinking water systems and works with owners and managers to assure that they provide safe and reliable drinking water. However, other state agencies regulate some water system activities. For example:

- The Department of Ecology issues “water rights”.
- The Utilities and Transportation Commission approves the rates that some water systems can charge their customers.
- Local health departments may carry out some activities for DOH.

### Free Publications

Division of Drinking Water  
Training and Outreach Section  
PO Box 47828 • Olympia, WA 98504-7828  
360-236-3164

Many publications are also available at  
[www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw/Our\\_Main\\_Pages/public.htm](http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw/Our_Main_Pages/public.htm)

### Toll-free Telephone Numbers

Department of Health, Division of Drinking Water  
800-521-0323

Environmental Protection Agency  
Safe Drinking Water  
800-426-4791

American Water Works Association  
800-366-0107

### For More Information

Department of Health regional offices know about all of the responsibilities listed in this brochure. For more information, contact the nearest office.

Northwest Regional Office - Kent  
253-395-6750

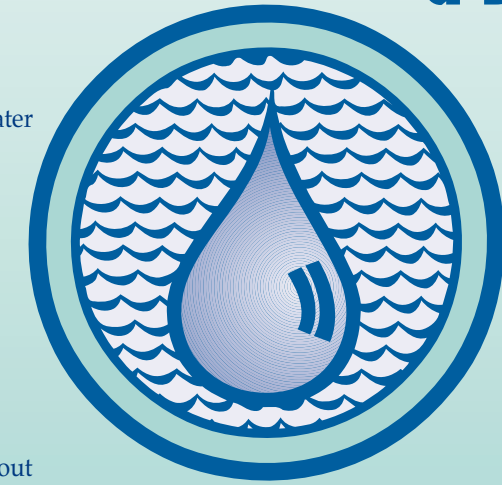
Southwest Regional Office - Olympia  
360-664-0768

Eastern Regional Office - Spokane  
509-456-3115

*The Department of Health is an equal opportunity agency. For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 800-525-0127 (TTY 800-833-6388).*

*For additional copies of this publication, call 800-521-0323. This and other publications are available at [www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw](http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw).*

# Owning and Managing a Drinking Water System



## How to Get Started

Before purchasing, developing, or managing a water system, ask three basic questions:

1. Is water available from an adjoining system?
2. Would it be less costly and more efficient to hire someone who has experience managing or operating a drinking water system?
3. Is there an agency in the area whose management services must or could be used?

If the answer to any of these is yes, you may not need to take on the responsibilities of managing a drinking water system.

**Prepare a written document for your system** that includes information about how you will respond to emergencies, how you will finance expenses, and how the system will be managed and operated.

**Get your source approved**, a process that includes on-site inspection, water rights documentation, water quantity testing, and water quality sampling. You also should have a program to protect and conserve the source.

**Most systems need to identify a certified person to operate the water system** – this may be you, another person, or an agency, but water system operator certification is required.

**Set up administrative procedures** that include operation policies, water sampling, meter reading and billing, and timely responses to complaints. A guide for small, non-expanding water systems is available from DOH that provides these and other basic elements of water system management and operation.

**Prevent contamination** by developing operating and management plans to protect your system.

**If you want to grow, your system may need to hire a professional engineer to help in planning and engineering.** Write these procedures down in an operations plan following DOH guidelines. Documents must be approved by DOH before growth occurs. Contact your DOH regional office for more information.

## How To Manage a System

**Get an annual operating permit** by updating the inventory of your system for DOH each year and paying the proper fee.

**DOH has special requirements for treating surface water sources, (e.g., lakes, rivers, etc.)** including monitoring the source and protecting systems. The operator or manager must ensure that proper treatment is provided for surface sources and groundwater sources under the direct influence of surface water. To find out more about these requirements, contact DOH.

## How to Make Improvements

**Evaluate your water system regularly** to make sure it works properly and that the facilities are protected against contamination and vandalism. Before you add users, be sure your system is approved by DOH to serve more users and that your system can handle them.

**Prepare written plans** (either a water system plan or a project report) that describe the improvements you need. You must use a professional engineer, meet DOH design standards, and show how improvements will be financed, designed, and constructed. Get DOH approval of the report, plans, and specifications (construction documents) before work starts.

**A professional engineer must certify** that construction of your improvements followed the approved construction documents, and this certification must be filed with DOH. All new or repaired system facilities must be disinfected and tested before they are placed into service.

## Buying or Selling a Drinking Water System

Contact DOH at least 12 months (when possible) prior to the transaction for a list of steps to follow when the water system changes owners so that the new owner knows what is required.

## Potential Consequences of Requirement Violations

**Legal actions and costly fines** – Although DOH takes many steps to ensure that you are informed of the requirements to run a water system, DOH or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency may require specific actions and/or daily fines for violations.

**Red operating permits** indicate that the water system is inadequate and is in substantial non-compliance with drinking water regulations. A red operating permit could result in the denial of building permits, on-site sewage disposal permits, food service permits, liquor licenses, and other permits or licenses for properties connected to, or to be connected to, the water system. In addition, lending institutions may choose not to finance loans for buying, refinancing, or remodeling if they are associated with these properties.

**Lawsuits** – Water users may file lawsuits against the owner of the drinking water system.

## Testing Water Samples

**Test water quality samples** – Arrange for a Washington state-certified lab to test your system’s water quality samples. You can get a list of qualified labs from DOH or the Department of Ecology.

**Sample for coliform** – Coliform samples are tested for bacteria that may indicate the presence of disease-causing organisms. Complete a plan for where and how often to sample for coliform, and follow the plan.

**Sample for chemicals** – A water quality monitoring report describing the water sampling requirements is mailed to water systems each year.

**Follow DOH requirements** – Keep sample records and report the results to DOH when sample results show a problem. Additional samples or inspection of the water system may be required to identify the cause(s) of the problem. Water users must be informed about the problem and the steps they should take to protect their health. In addition, repair or disinfection of the system may be required.